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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000452

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
DEPARTMENT PLEASE ALSO PASS TOPEC
NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03-15-14

TAGS: PGOV PINS PTER PHUM SOCI CE LTTE

SUBJECT: In visit, a tense, brooding Jaffna is preoccupied with election campaign, split in LTTE

Refs: Colombo 446, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Poloff visited Jaffna District in northern Sri Lanka, March 13-14. Preparations for Sri Lanka's April 2 parliamentary elections were proceeding apace, and interest in the campaign seemed relatively high. The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) appears poised to do well. Tamil contacts generally criticized eastern LTTE leader Karuna and his recent split with the main LTTE organization. Overall, Jaffna seemed tense and brooding, with the Tigers clearly making their presence felt. END SUMMARY.

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VISIT TO JAFFNA

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¶2. (C) Poloff and Pol FSN traveled to Jaffna District in northern Sri Lanka, March 13-14. In contrast to earlier Mission visits, the atmosphere in Jaffna appeared somewhat more tense and brooding. Far fewer people were present on the streets, although conditions were outwardly calm. (The only security incident that occurred during the visit was the apparent shooting death of a GSL soldier in Jaffna town on March 14. It is not clear whether the shooting was an accident or was perpetrated by the LTTE.) Campaign posters for Sri Lanka's upcoming parliamentary elections were in evidence, but far fewer than in past electoral campaigns, according to contacts. (Sri Lanka's Elections Commissioner has cracked down on posters and other campaign paraphernalia which are banned under Sri Lanka's elections law -- See Reftels.) The team also paid a brief visit to Kayts Island located to the west of Jaffna Peninsula. Kayts was very quiet, with fishermen and vegetable farmers going about their business.

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INTEREST IN CAMPAIGN HIGH

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¶3. (C) Preparations for the April 2 parliamentary elections were in full swing and interest in the campaign appeared relatively high. The government elections office in Jaffna was a bustling hive of activity, even though it was a weekend. Assistant Elections Commissioner (Jaffna) T. Nadarajah told poloff that he and his staff had been working "around the clock" in preparation for the elections. Nadarajah said he expected an orderly and uneventful election, with "a good" voter turnout from Jaffna District's over 600,000 voters. Jaffna Municipal Commissioner E. Ramalingam noted that voter interest was on the increase in the district compared with the 2001 parliamentary elections. He added that there had not been too much campaign-related violence, thus far, and he was hoping that the situation remained largely peaceful in the leadup to election day. On the subject of access to polling for voters from north/east areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), both Nadarajah and Ramalingam felt confident that arrangements would be made to allow for such voting. (Elections Commissioner Dananda Dissanayake has tentatively indicated that voting for those people from LTTE-controlled areas can take place in the "no-man's land" located on the fringes of LTTE-controlled areas.)

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TNA SAID TO BE DOING WELL

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¶4. (C) Echoing comments made by many other interlocutors, M. Senathirajah, an MP and a TNA candidate, was extremely confident about the TNA's chances in the election. He said that the TNA was benefiting from strong support from younger Tamil voters. Other contacts noted that LTTE cadre in Jaffna

were clearly backing the TNA (which is a pro-Tiger party), noting that such backing gave the party a big advantage in the race for support in the Tamil community. Meanwhile, Douglas Devananda, head of the anti-LTTE Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) and an MP, told poloff that his party had been actively campaigning in Jaffna District and the outlying islands. He thought the EPDP would do well despite what he characterized as "rampant intimidation" by the LTTE. Observers were not sure how V. Anandasangaree, a senior MP who is at odds with the LTTE, would fare in the election. Some thought he might win, but many also noted that the LTTE was working hard against him. Opinion among contacts was divided as to the ultimate outcome of the election. Conforming to the view of many observers in the south, most contacts felt that neither the President's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) nor the Prime Minister's United National Party (UNP), would obtain a clear majority on April 2. It would then fall to a minority party, most probably the TNA, to throw its weight behind one of the large parties so that it could form a government. Observers were certain that the UNP would be the beneficiary of the TNA's support.

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ANGER ABOUT LTTE SPLIT

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15. (C) Queried about the recent split in the LTTE between eastern and northern elements (see Reftels), most contacts criticized eastern leader Karuna for his decision to separate his forces from the main LTTE organization. Government Agent for Kayts Island J.H. Selvanayagam said he was "highly worried" about the split in the Tiger ranks, fearing it would adversely affect the peace process. Jaffna University Professor of History K. Sitrampalam characterized Karuna's decision to break with the LTTE as "a further, unneeded, unwanted, division among Tamils" which comes at an inopportune time. Theories abounded as to the rationale behind Karuna's separation from the main LTTE organization. Speculation that Karuna was receiving some type of outside support was rife. Some contacts blamed India's intelligence apparatus, RAW, for example. (No evidence of any Indian government or other "hidden hand" involvement was provided, however.) Some contacts thought that Karuna had acted on his own for the reasons he (Karuna) has announced to the press. Jaffna's Roman Catholic Vicar-General Father Nicholas, for example, said he thought that Karuna had acted genuinely out of anger toward northern Tamils for their poor treatment of eastern Tamils. In any case, Nicholas remarked that Karuna was now seen as a "spokesperson by disaffected Tamils in the east," which was a problem for the main LTTE organization.

16. (C) The only contact who actually spoke out in favor of Karuna's moves was Douglas Devananda, the EPDP leader. Devananda -- a longtime leader of anti-LTTE Tamils -- was very happy with Karuna, indicating that the eastern commander had acted legitimately out of concern about the way eastern LTTE personnel had been treated by the main LTTE organization in the north. He was confident that Karuna was in a strong military position in the east and would be able to hold out for some time. When asked, he replied that the EPDP had not been in touch with Karuna.

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COMMENT

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17. (C) As noted, Jaffna seemed tense and brooding. It was not clear why. There are two likely factors, however. The first has to do with the campaign. Although there does seem to be a high degree of interest in the April 2 election, it appears that much of this may be due to the Tigers, who are making their presence felt. The LTTE as an organization has indicated in public that it wants the TNA to do well and is clearly putting pressure on the Tamil community to get out the vote. This pressure seems to be creating significant stress. The second factor has to do with Karuna's rebellion: Jaffna Tamils are a proud group and are taking his decision to split from the LTTE while blaming "northern Tamils" (i.e., those who are from Jaffna) very personally. In making his move, Karuna appears not only to have identified a faultline within the LTTE, but also one in Sri Lanka's Tamil community at large. The newfound public discussion of the societal split is bracing and a source of deep discomfort for Jaffna Tamils. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

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